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ABSTRACT

A number of research problems have hindered the study of Australian aboriginal languages which are spoken by a steadily decreasing and vanishing population. Such research has been plagued by misunderstanding and poor communication between linguists and the remaining informants. Much of the previous research, because of funding policies, has been conducted by trainee linguists. While work in phonology and morphology has been adequate, work in syntax has been scanty. Although syntactic research may improve in future studies, there is the danger of producing a grammar based on a model fashionable at the moment, rather than a grammar which presents basic data and which could later be adapted to a particular model. Research in the aboriginal languages is worthwile for the study of language and culture in general and also for discoveries in dialect studies in language typology, classification, and development. (VM)

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SALVAGE WORK IN AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES[1]

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INTRODUCTION

At the time of the first European settlement, Australia was inhabited by over five hundred Aboriginal tribes each with its own dialect. Most of these dialects were very different from one another in vocabulary and quite different from one another in morphology and syntax. One classification, which is based on cognate densities in lexical items, recognizes over two hundred different languages and this seems to me to be a fairly realistic figure.[2]

The Aborigines, numbering probably no more than 300.000 over the whole of Australia, lacked the social organization and the weapons to provide effective resistance to the European settlers. If they resisted, enough of their number were killed till they resisted no more. Moreover, many fell prey to the white man's diseases. So one way or another the Aboriginal population was reduced, and in closely settled areas, the Aboriginal population was practically exterminated. The last Tasmanian Aboriginal died in 1876. This is particularly unfortunate, because there is evidence that the Tasmanians were ethnically and linguistically distinct from the mainland natives.

Today one finds on the one hand practically no Aborigines in Victoria while on the other hand there are some flourishing tribes in the centre of Australia

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and along and near the north coast of the continent. In between these extremes one finds over one hundred tribes represented by no more than a score of survivors. In most cases one can find one, two, three or perhaps half a dozen people who still know the language of these tribes, and from these people something of the dying language can be salvaged.

THE INFORMANTS

These last speakers are usually to be found in shanty towns on the edge of white settlements. Usually they are old. In typical 'salvage areas' - most of the sparsely settled parts of NSW, for instance, or most of Queensland - one does not find many middle aged Aborigines who speak a native language though they may "hear" (understand) a little.

Some people who claim to speak a native tongue, or who are reputed to be able to do so, know only vocabulary, mostly concrete nouns. Others know only cliches, and others speak a simplified form of the language. But there are some who still speak their language fluently and often they have not used the language for a decade or so either because they are the sole surviving speaker of their language or because the other surviving speakers live in another place. In fact, it is a remarkable thing that one can go from the lower Darling to the Gulf and find language after language with only one or with only two or three scattered informants. This means of course that scores of languages will become completely extinct within a decade or so.

Since these languages are no longer living in the sense that they are spoken by a community, the study

of them must be carried out almost entirely by bilingual elicitation. The field worker asks the informant to translate English words and phrases. If the field worker is fortunate, the informant may know some stories and these will provide unelicited running text. Most informants can provide some sort of monologue, usually a recounting of events of their early life. Dialogue is difficult to obtain. If there is more than one informant available, it is often the case that they live miles apart.

Communication with informants is not always smooth. At first they may not understand what the linguist wants of them. Typically they do not translate what they are asked to translate, but substitute something else. If asked for The man hit the dog, they are likely to say something that means Don't hit the dog. Although some informants speak good English (in a functional sense), most have only a limited understanding of English and speak a broken form of English with an admixture of pidgin - that spear belonga which fella, picanning sit longa gin. Their English vocabulary is usually sprinkled with words that are obsolescent in present day English - gammon (pretend), shake (steal), plant (hide something, hide oneself) - or with words used in unfamiliar senses - hit ('kill' as well as 'hit'), hear ('understand' a lingo) meat or skin (totem). In western Queensland the term benjiman or benji is used for 'spouse'. According to Roth,[3] this is derived from English 'fancy man'.

RESEARCH IN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES

Quite a number of Aboriginal languages were described in the nineteenth century and short vocabularies were

collected from hundreds of tribes. The quality of this early work is reasonable, but almost all of it is marred by phonetic inaccuracy. As an example, consider the following attempts at rendering the Goa word for beard - (Goa is an extinct language of western Queensland) -

1. notunyah
2. ngthunya
3. ŭt-tŭn-ya
4. nartinya[4]

The word is probably ŋaṯana. Initial velar nasals were often notated as 'n', 'ny' or not heard at all (see item 3). Dental [ṯ] is usually heard as 't' or 'th' and alveolar [t] as 't' or 'd'. Since item 2 contains th, the second consonant is probably [ṯ]. This example also serves to show how comparison of old sources coupled with a knowledge of typical Aboriginal phonologies can provide a reasonably accurate phonetic form, at least in favourable cases.

In the first generation of the twentieth century surpisingly little work was done on Aboriginal languages, and then in the late thirties A. Capell of Sydney University pioneered the modern linguistic study of the native languages. In the forties, fifties and early sixties some good work was done by Capell and others such as Wurm, Hale, Douglas and O'Grady, but the volume of this work, especially the volume of published work, was small in proportion to the number of languages available for study. In 1961 the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was formed and this body made funds availabe for the study of Aboriginal culture. The bulk of this money went to linguists, usually people working towards a higher degree, and from 1965 to 1972 the Institute sponsored about 100 studies in linguistics.[5]

This meant that sufficient linguists were working on Aboriginal languages to keep up with the need to record the great number of moribund languages that had remained hitherto uninvestigated. Most of the linguists who were sponsored by the A.I.A.S. either worked on dying languages or recorded material in one or more dying languages as a sidline during the depth study of a flourishing language.

The work of this new spate of linguists has not always been of the highest standard. Their descriptions are typically passable in phonology, adequate in morphology (though usually meagre in exemplification) and scanty in syntax.There are several reasons for the lack of syntax. One is that linguists of five and ten years ago were usually trained in a tradition that devoted most of its attention to phonology and morphology. Another is that the field situation demands that one pay attention to phonetics first and morphology second. In both the study of linguistics as it was a few years ago and in the field study of a 'rare' language, syntax came last. A third reason is that syntax was often conceived rather narrowly as being just a matter of word order. In some cases, of course, the reason for the superficiality and the lack of syntax was due to the lack of information availabe from the informants.

Of course it must be remembered too that the work I refer to is not the work of professional linguists but trainee linguists. In light of the fact that the study of linguistics is relatively new in Australia, the only people availabe to receive money from the A.I.A.S. were people at the beginning of their linguistic careers.

At present, interest in syntax is high in linguistics and the descriptions of Aboriginal languages that appear over the next few years may be better in this respect. There is a danger, however, that linguists will produce a grammar based on a model fashionable at the time of their writing. A description based on an 'Aspects' model will seem, after another generation, to be an historical curiosity, and a difficult one to read at that. What is needed is a detailed cataloguing of data according to morpho-syntactic criteria and according to semantic criteria. An attempt to describe a language according to an 'Aspects' model or a 'Case' model should be in addition to a grammar that provides basic data. This grammar should enable one to go a long way towards producing a grammar according to some particular model. It should enable one to find the answers to various questions that arise in pursuit of a particular theory. For instance, if one is interested in whether the Fillmore-Langendoen role of experiencer is distinguished from the role of agent one should be able to find out. Recent grammars of Aboriginal languages tend to supply information of this sort only if it is morphologically overt.

IS SALVAGE STUDY WORTHWHILE ?

In defence of the study of Aboriginal languages, one could state that in order to understand human language in general one must study all languages. A new language may bring to light a hitherto undiscovered fact.

One could point to the interesting question of genetic relationship between Australian languages and between Australian languages and languages outside Australia.

The superficial facts relevant here are that Australian languages resemble one another closely in phonology and that there are many correspondences in morphology and syntax. On the other hand no Australian language resembles an 'overseas' language.

One could point to the interesting typological question of how 500 dialects come to have a phonological similarity and a lexical diversity that is unparalleled elsewhere.

And finally one could cite cultural reasons for studying Aboriginal languages - access to literature, understanding Aboriginal culture, improving the standing of Aboriginal culture in European eyes by publishing accounts of their language and literature, providing material that will be of interest to the Aborigines themselves when more of them become educated.

Now anyone who concedes that that study of language is worthwhile will concede that the study of Aboriginal languages is worthwhile, but some have pointed out that these goals cannot be achieved in the salvage situation. They have pointed to the fact that what is produced is often lacking in depth and often bastardized.

However, I think that there are answers to these arguments. First of all, meagre information can be useful in genetic or typological classification. For instance, a western Queensland language, Kunkalanya, is known to us only to the extent of a hundred words and a score of phrases. But this information is sufficient to enable us to classify the language as an eastern dialect of the Pitta-Pitta group. At least we know that this 'lost'

language was not a typological oddity or a possible missing link that could have been a serious loss from the point of view of comparative reconstruction and genetic classification. I grant that some salvage work does consist of compiling word lists that have little value other than sentimental, but no linguist spends much time on this sort of activity.

The second argument, that the value of salvage study is not very great because the material one finds is often bastardized, seems to me to be based on the narrow view that the study of an Aboriginal language is only worthwhile if we can find it uncontaminated by another Aboriginal language or by English, and without any sign of having been simplified. But it seems to me that besides that essentially diachronic interest, there is an interest in the synchronic reality whatever that reality is. If a language is 'simplified', it is interesting to see in what sense it is simplified. If a language has been influenced by English, it is interesting to see in what ways it has been influenced. For example, most Aboriginal languages have an ergative system for nouns, this means that the subject of a transitive verb is marked, normally by a suffix, as distinct from the subject of an intransitive verb, which is usually left unmarked. Now this marking is part of an overt case system and only this case is not paralleled by a preposition or prepositions in English. In light of this it is interesting to note that one of the first inflections to be lost is the ergative. In some languages this case suffix also has an instrumental function and it is notable that with a number of informants who have 'simplified' grammars of various languages the ergative suffix in its instrumental function is replaced by a stem forming suffix that means

'having'. So that the equivalent of He hit the dog with a stick is rendered by something that also corresponds to He, having a stick, hit the dog. This sort of 'simplification', incidentally, is to be distinguished from a sort of performance simplification that is the result of an informant trying to make it easy for a tyro linguist. What I refer to is a reduced competence, where the informant uses a grammar, with great consistency and in all circumstances, that is impoverished by comparison with that of other speakers of the same language. In these cases, the informant may even correct utterances produced by the linguist on the basis of other informants' grammars, modifying them in the direction of his or her smaller grammar. Other features of these reduced and modified grammars are English word order, the use of demonstratives in a way that resembles the English articles and the replacement of specific nouns by generic ones, e.g. a word for 'meat' or 'game' replacing the specific words for 'galah, emu, wallaby' etc.

The extension of the lexicon to cover new content introduced by Europeans is also interesting. All possibilities were used: in some cases existing lexical items acquired new senses (thus a word for 'hawk' may be extended to cover 'aeroplane'); in other cases English words were assimilated ('missus' appearing as miṭiṭi for 'white woman' in Kalkadoon), and in other cases again various processes of word formation were used, for example, butcher ('killer of meat'), copper boiler ('heater of water') and policeman ('one who ties people up').

But having said this, I should point out, in conclusion, that for most languages that are no longer viable,

a large corpus of accurate information can be obtained, accurate in the sense of being neither substantially impoverished nor influenced, except superficially, by English or by other Aboriginal languages. It is to be hoped that the collection of this data continues at its present rate, for as I stated before, scores of languages will become extinct within the next decade or so. In the present concern about the near extinction of certain species of birds and animals, what is often lost sight of is that human beings are subject to extermination too. Many Aboriginal tribes have disappeared, the whole Tasmanian race has vanished. Over the next decade or so many more tribes will pass into extinction, their language and lore lost forever, save for the notes and tapes of scholars.

NOTES

1. This paper is a revised version of one read at the XIVth AULLA congress, Dunedin, 1972.
2. O'Grady, G.N. and C.F. and F.M. Voegelin: Languages of the World: Indo-Pacific Fascicle Six. Anthropological Linguistics, Vol.8 No.2, February 1966.
3. Roth, W.E.: Ethnological Studies among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines. Brisbane, 1897.
4. Item 3 is from Roth, op.cit., the rest are from various numbers of the 'Science of Man'
5. Oates W.J. and Lynette F.eds : A Revised Linguistic Survey of Australia, A.I.A.S., Canberra, 1970.